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In Excelsis

IN EXCELSIS

by

Lord Alfred Douglas

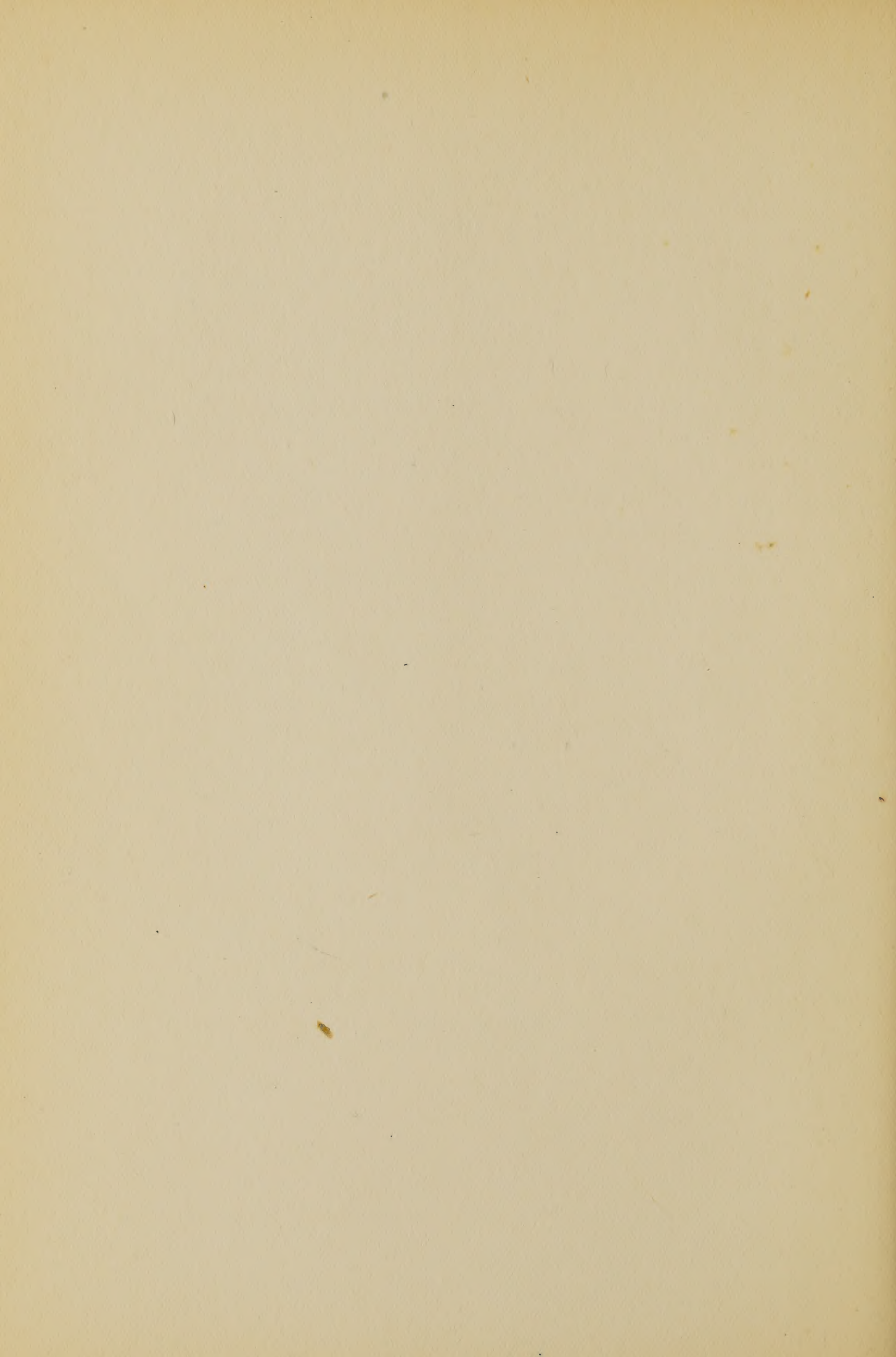
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L o n d o n : M a r t i n S e c k e r

This sonnet-sequence was written
in Wormwood Scrubs Prison.
Began on February 5, and finished
on Good Friday, April 18, 1924.

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TO
ALFRED ROSE



PREFACE

On December 13th, 1923, I was sentenced by Mr. Justice Avory at the Old Bailey to six months' imprisonment in the second division, for libelling Mr. Winston Churchill. It may be interesting to record the fact that this prosecution constituted the seventh attempt to get me locked up which I have had to face during the last ten years. Six previous attempts to put me into the place where, according to a gentle advocate (I refer to my "sweet enemy" Sir Patrick Hastings), I "so properly belong," all failed in their object. The seventh attempt succeeded. Which surely goes to show that there is nothing like perseverance.

I had looked, at my trial at the Old Bailey, to my own evidence in the witness-box, and especially to my cross-examination by the Attorney-General, as the means of vindicating myself to the public. My Counsel and friend, Mr. Cecil Hayes, put to me a series of questions which were designed to give me the opportunity of explaining to the Jury how I came to publish the libel and what evidence I had at the time when it was first given publicity in "Plain English." All these questions were objected to by Counsel for the Prosecution and disallowed by the Judge. The same tactics were adopted in my cross-examination. I had looked forward to a ding-dong fight with the Attorney-General, Sir Douglas Hogg (who was the Counsel I had so effectively

disposed of a year before in my action against the "Evening News," when I got a verdict and a thousand pounds damages), and I expected my cross-examination to last several hours. Instead of this Sir Douglas Hogg asked me exactly three questions and then sat down. Thus I was effectually muzzled and debarred from making my case public. I said at the time what I thought about the way I had been trapped, and there is no point in saying more now. The whole question will be judged by Posterity when the time comes for it to be judged.

I think that it is advisable that I should take this opportunity of clearing up a misconception which is almost universal in the public mind about the "second division" to which I was sentenced. Prisoners sent to the "second division" are treated in exactly the same way as those sent to hard labour, with this solitary difference—that they are not deprived of their mattresses for the first fortnight of their imprisonment as is the case with those undergoing hard labour. In every other respect their treatment is the same. They occupy the same cells, do the same labour, keep the same hours, and get the same food. The only privileges attaching to the "second division" are those whereby a prisoner is allowed to receive more visits, and to write and receive more letters (one a month is the allowance in each case).

The worst part about prison, materially speaking, is the food. It is so disgusting that a dog would

certainly not eat it unless he were starving. I was quite unable to eat it, and for the first three weeks of my sentence I ate nothing but a few crusts of dry bread, and very nasty bread at that. As a result, of course, I lost weight with great rapidity. Curiously enough, however, I did not feel ill at first. I lived fairly comfortably "on my tissues," my health remained good, and I slept nine hours every night, in spite of a plank bed, and a mattress and pillow as hard as nether millstones. It was only after a month that I began to feel weak and ill as the result of under nourishment. I went on the vegetarian diet after the first three weeks, and I was able to eat slightly more of this diet than of the other. But by the middle of the seventh week, I had lost more than eighteen pounds and was on the verge of collapse, and I was then sent to the hospital, where I got comparatively decent food, and where I remained for the remaining three months of my sentence.

Owing to the kindness of my friend, Mr. Alfred Rose, who made a special application on my behalf to the Home Office, I was allowed a school copybook and a pencil while I was in the hospital. I wrote my poem in this book, and the Home Office, for reasons best known to itself, refused me permission to bring it out with me when I left prison. However, as I, of course, had the seventeen sonnets of which my poem consists, in my head, this official outrage put me to no worse

inconvenience than that of having to write them out again from memory.

The poem speaks for itself, and I need only say that its theology is that of the Catholic Mystics, and in particular of St. Thomas á Kempis, whose "Imitation of Christ" I read through several times during my imprisonment. I am so far from regretting my imprisonment or from having any ill feelings against those who are responsible for it, that I can truly say that I regard it as the best thing that ever happened to me. This is not to say that I did not suffer a great deal. I did suffer, more especially in a spiritual way, to an extent which I would not have believed to be possible, consistently with remaining alive : but what I think about this is better expressed in the poem than I could explain it in a hundred pages of prose. I think it only right to add that I received the greatest possible kindness from everyone in prison, Governor, Deputy Governor, "R.C." Priest, Doctor, "Officers," and last but not least, fellow-prisoners.

ALFRED BRUCE DOUGLAS.

Torment of body, torment of the mind,
 Pain, hunger, insult, stark ingratitude
 Of those for whom we fought, detraction rude
 But sanctimonious, cruel to be kind,
 (Truly for bread a stone) : all these we find
 In this our self-appointed hell whose food
 Is our own flesh. To what imagined good
 Have we thus panted, beaten, bound and blind ?

God knows, God knows. And since He knows indeed,
 Why there's the answer : who would stay outside
 When God's in prison ? Who would rather choose
 To warm himself with Peter than to bleed
 With Dismas penitent and crucified,
 Facing with Christ the fury of the Jews ?

II

“ For honour peereth in the meanest habit.”

Shakespeare.—“*The Taming of the Shrew*,” *Act IV, Sc. 3.*

I follow honour, brokenly content,
Though the sick flesh repine, though darkness creep
Into the soul's unfathomable deep,
Where fear is bred : though from my spirit spent
Like poured-out water, the mind's weak consent
Be hardly wrung, while eyes too tired to weep
Dimly discern, as through a film of sleep,
Squalor that is my honour's ornament.

Without, the fire of earth-contemning stars
Burns in deep blueness, like an opal set
In jacinth borders underneath the moon.
The dappled shadow that my window bars
Cast on the wall is like a silver net.
My angel, in my heart, sings “ heaven soon.”

III

I have within me that which still defies
This generation's bloat intelligence,
Which is the advocate of my defence
Against the indictment of the world's assize.
Clutching with bleeding hands my hard-won prize,
Immeasurably bought by fierce expense
Of blood and sweat and spirit-harnessed sense,
I keep the steadfast gaze of tear-washed eyes.

And this discernment, not inherited,
But grimly conned in many cruel schools,
Unravels all illusion to my sight.
In vain, for me with wings, the snare is spread.*
Folly imputed by the mouth of fools
Is wisdom's ensign to a child of light.

* Proverbs (Douay Version), Ch. i. v. 17.

“ But a net is spread in vain before the eyes of them
that have wings.”

“ Wings ” here means prayer.

IV

When death, the marshal of our settled state,
Shall beckon us to our appointed end,
To what remembrances shall be the trend
Of those last thoughts that gather at the gate?
What profit then that this was delicate,
Or that breathed flowers? Shall they not rather tend
To recollected woe as to a friend,
For pleasures are but hostages to fate?

What bitterness shall then be left in these,
As insult, calumny, the truth abjured,
The dock, the hand-cuff and the prison cell,
Detraction bartered for forensic fees,
And, else, a thousand wrongs bravely endured
And sovereign against the gates of hell?

V

O none, if grace enrich the soul's release
 With covenanted joy's presentiment,
 Sweet presage of fruition's deep content
 Which is the complement of hope's increase,
 The harvest of delight, sorrow's surcease,
 The untransmutable extreme consent
 Of will and spirit ultimately blent
 In diapason of perpetual peace.

But who can so set up his reason's throne
 Above the accident of mortal hap,
 As to embrace disparagements and mocks,
 Encounter suffering without a groan,
 Lie like a nurseling in affliction's lap
 And realise the saintly paradox?

VI

Not I, alas, at any rate, not yet ;
Prisoned in flesh the willing spirit wars,
Glimpses a transient lustre through the bars
And beats her wings in vain against the net.
In vain her evocated hosts beset
The citadel that lies beyond the stars ;
The guarded walls stand up like beetling scaurs,
Though white desire o'er-leap the parapet.

Perfection's fortress is impregnable,
But her saint-trodden way allures us still.
She bids us cherish what our senses hate,
And entertain where we would fain repel ;
And love at last constrains the inconstant will
To make the bitter choice deliberate.

VII

For such is love, a great good every way,
Bearing all toil, making all burdens light :
To its internal vision the dark night
Shows clear and shining as the dawn of day :
Being born of God it still denies to stay
With less than God, but evermore takes flight
To the belov'd on wings as swift as sight,
A torch, a vivid flame, a lucent ray.

Could love compel the appertinent retinue
Of all our essence to some bridge of air,
Spanning the gulf of that estranging sea
Which hides the lover from the loved one's view,
How happy then were we who lothly wear
This earthy vesture of mortality.

The octave of this sonnet comes almost verbatim from
St. Thomas à Kempis' "The Imitation of Christ."

VIII

But so to use oneself as to entice
The visit of such love, so dignified
With such a sovereignty, may scarce betide
Us the sad out-cast heirs of paradise.
Hardly the merchant paid the exceeding price
Of that one pearl whose lustrous sheen outvied
The zenith of his longing, else denied
To any less than utter sacrifice.

And how shall we, unemptied of desire
Of all created things, command our Lord
Or open hopeful casements to the Dove?
Nay, but the spark pre-vents consuming fire,
The seedling predicates the harvest's hoard,
From depth to height love corresponds to love.

IX

And we bereft, diswinged, a very clod
Of sense-afflicted earth, uncomforted,
Cheated of dreams, whose flatteries have fled,
Long since, fierce disillusion's iron rod ;
We whose entrammelled feet yet dully plod
The bitter road that saints were wont to tread
Fulfilled of joy, by angel hosts beſtead,
Or led like children by the hand of God,—

We have this love, and having it possess
The laſt reversion of felicity.
For what, but love of God, could ſo enforce
This furious will to ſeize on bitterness,
Revoke the lease of nature, and decree
With ſweetneſs irremediable divorce ?

X

For willingly I suffer, and endure
 What I endure with full-consenting will
 (Though not with joy) and therefore I fulfil,
 By this consent to suffering, the pure
 Condition of love's presence, made more sure
 By this that nature groans and takes it ill
 And is at odds with grace which steads me still,
 And what the world calls love I do abjure.

For this miscalled of fools, this "scion" born
 Of "motions," "carnal stings," "unbitted lusts,"*
 (As the Venetian demi-devil's wit
 Reports it so) than midnight to bright morn
 Is not more alien to love, nor thrusts
 Against love's breast a blade more opposite.

* *Shakespeare.*—*Iago in "Othello," Act I, Sc. 3.*

XI

“ Call it not love, for Love to heaven has fled
Since sweating lust on earth usurped his name.”

Shakespeare.—“*Venus and Adonis.*”

But this equivocation is a mesh
To unrespective minds (as to the liar
Truth is reflected like the moon in mire),
And, to subserve occasion, devilish.
Love is a flame whose fuel is the flesh
Which, burning in that unconsuming fire,
Distils the milky dew of chaste desire
Whose secret sap wells ever sweet and fresh.

For love essentially must needs be chaste,
And being contracted to unchastity
(Even in marriage) knows essential loss,
And falls into a malady of waste,
Squand'ring the expended spirit's minted fee
For that which, in the best, is worthless dross.

XII

Have at you, inky scrabblers, base and lewd
Whose general pen so greasily en seams
The venal page with birth-controlling schemes,
Free love, divorce and devil take the prude.
Thus I engorge you with chameleon's food,*
Promise-crammed vapour, stuff of angels' dreams,
Immortal madness, folly that o'er-teems
And turns to star-dust all her airy brood.

And if it gall you and you needs must rail,
Let me not be your mark, but rail at God
Who made love chaste or ever time began.
I have but dreamed one rose to countervail
The rank effusions of the period,
The blazoned grossness of your devil's span.

* "Excellently well i' faith of the chameleon's dish.
I eat the air promise-crammed ; you cannot feed capons so."

Shakespeare.—"Hamlet," *Act III, Sc. 2.*

XIII

And well you know I never bowed the knee,
Nor paid regard to self-preserving ruth,
For even when I sucked perverted truth
From that arch-prophet of perversity
Who led me to the serpent-cinctured tree,
I bayed the pack alone ; my tender youth,
As now my slanting years, disdained the smooth,
The proffered path of worldly policy.

And if, disvouching then my angel's voice,
I could by natural spirit so outface
The frowning world and its proclaimed offence
Against my friend, shall I not more rejoice
To hate and brave it now, bestead by grace
And my long since recaptured innocence ?

XIV

For I was of the world's top, born to bask
In its preferment where the augurs sit,
And where the devil's grace, to counterfeit,
Is all the tribute that the augurs ask
(Whose wedding-garment is a hood and mask).
But God be praised who still denied me wit
To "play the game" or play the hypocrite
And make a virtue of the devil's task.

I left "the game" to others, and behold,
This same perversion's priest, this lord of lies
Is now exalted on your altar's height ;
His sophist's tinsel is acclaimed pure gold,
And England's course, swayed by his votaries,
Declines upon corruption and black night.

XV

The leprous spawn of scattered Israel
Spreads its contagion in your English blood ;
Teeming corruption rises like a flood
Whose fountain swelters in the womb of hell.
Your Jew-kept politicians buy and sell
In markets redolent of Jewish mud,
And while the " Learned Elders " chew the cud *
Of liquidation's fruits, they weave their spell.

They weave the spell that binds the heart's desire
To gold and gluttony and sweating lust :
In hidden holds they stew the mandrake mess
That kills the soul and turns the blood to fire,
They weave the spell that turns desire to dust
And postulates the abyss of nothingness.

* Reference to the book, " The Protocols of The Learned Elders of Zion," which contains the revelation of the Jewish world-wide plot to destroy Christianity and enslave all the nations of the earth.

XVI

Their spell binds fast, their feet are on your necks
 But not on mine, I could not choose but fight,
 Lacking your "English Phlegm" to take delight
 In Apemantus' "coil," "serving of becks" *
 And all the rest; I was ordained to vex
 This "Pax Judaica," the parasite
 Of base assent, this oily sea whose might
 O'er-swells the gorged loot of a million wrecks.

My star shone clear, my angel smiled, I went
 Down the white way, I could not break my tryst
 With Scotland's honour in an English gaol.
 My soul fares free, my neck was never bent
 To any yoke except the yoke of Christ,
 This Douglas knee will never bow to Baal.

* *Shakespeare*.—"Timon of Athens," Act I, Sc. 2.

EPILOGUE

Follow the star. The unseen sighing wings
Beat in the soul's night in the forest's gloom.
Follow the star, the Child is in the womb
That shall be born, the lamp is lit that swings
Over joy's cradle. Who is this that sings
In the heart's garden where red roses bloom?
The moth-soft fleece is woven on God's loom,
The web of peace is spun, ye holy Kings.

Follow the star and enter where it rests,
Be it on palace or on lowly shed.
What house is this whose hideous bolt and bar
Groan on the opening? Who are these pale guests,
These creeping shadows? Whither am I led?
What iron hold is here? *Follow the star.*

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